

Readings for Sunday the 19th Week of the Year

FIRST READING: Kings 19:9a, 11-13a

A reading from the first Book of Kings:

At the mountain of God, Horeb, Elijah came to a cave where he took shelter. Then the LORD said to him, "Go outside and stand on the mountain before the LORD; the LORD will be passing by." A strong and heavy wind was rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake there was fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. After the fire there was a tiny whispering sound. When he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak and went and stood at the entrance of the cave.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 85:9, 10, 11-12, 13-14

Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.

I will hear what God proclaims; the Lord - for he proclaims peace. Near indeed is his salvation to those who fear him, glory dwelling in our land.

Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.

Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss. Truth shall spring out of the earth, and justice shall look down from heaven.

Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.

The Lord himself will give his benefits; our land shall yield its increase. Justice shall walk before him, and prepare the way of his steps.

Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.

SECOND READING: Romans 9:1-5

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans:

Brothers and sisters: I speak the truth in Christ, I do not lie; my conscience joins with the Holy Spirit in bearing me witness that I have great sorrow and constant anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites; theirs the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; theirs the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

The word of the Lord.

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

After he had fed the people, Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and precede him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. After doing so, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When it was evening he was there alone. Meanwhile the boat, already a few miles offshore, was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it. During the fourth watch of the night, he came toward them walking on the sea. When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. "It is a ghost," they said, and they cried out in fear. At once Jesus spoke to them, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter said to him in reply, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how strong the wind was he became frightened; and, beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught Peter, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" After they got into the boat, the wind died down. Those who were in the boat did him homage, saying, "Truly, you are the Son of God."

The Gospel of the Lord

Reflection for Sunday the 19th Week of the Year

When we try to envision the power, glory and eternity of God, what image do we form? The image is probably something we know. That makes sense since how could we have an image of something we do not know? Earthquakes, storms of wind and rain, storms of fire and perhaps a tsunami can come to mind. These are destructive images, though. Perhaps the birth of a baby can be another, powerful image. However, only about half of the human population has ever witnessed one. Only half of us can give birth. As life giving as the birth of a baby is, it's still messy and, for mom, painful. Any image we can envision will have our human limitations.

Elijah the prophet journeyed to the mountain top to encounter God. God told him to go there. Elijah had just finished a challenge to the pagan god and pagan priesthood to light a bonfire by the god's power alone. Elijah likewise called upon the power of God to do the same. God lit the fire and thereby won the contest. Elijah and his followers subsequently slaughtered all the pagan priests in a blood bath. This action turned Elijah into an outlaw and he had to get out of town fast. Horeb may have been God's holy mountain and God's place of residence on earth, but it became a place of refuge for Elijah as he hid from the authorities till the outrage of his deed subsided.

The mountain offered protection to Elijah for few would venture to the dwelling of God. Mountains are usually remote and difficult to climb. Wild beasts hunted prey among the mountains as they do today. The mountain provided refuge and retreat. Elijah got away from it all. He knew that on Horeb, God would arrive. As Elijah waited for God many powerful and destructive events occurred. God was not in them. God came to Elijah not in special effects, but in subtlety. God spoke in a sublime, "small, still voice." No one can miss an earthquake and landslide. If we expect God there, we can miss the subtlety. Elijah did not.

How do we expect God to encounter us? Some of my most powerful encounters with God have happened in simple things. Thirty five years ago, my goddaughter was born. I visited her, her mother and father the next day. She was the youngest, healthy baby I ever held in my arms. As I noted her perfect features and pondered the wonder of her life to be, I was filled with a sense of the presence and wonder of God. I held her for minutes only. Her mother didn't want to let me hold her, at first, and wanted her back. All these years later that memory still holds me tightly. I can still tear-up as I remember. Such is the subtlety of God's presence. Whereas such subtlety may seem to be easily missed or overlooked, moments like that almost shout the presence of God. Elijah heard God. I have heard and do hear God. I suspect you do too. God came at a moment of Elijah's greatest need. God is always near.

With a little introspection, I am sure, all of us will discover moments like that. Sometimes all we need is a name by which we can call them. Elijah journeyed to seek out God. God sought out Elijah as well. We all seek God too. Each time we pray, go to church and offer what we think, feel, need or want to God, God comes to us. There are also moments while alone, standing in line at Jewel (as we stand on the "x's" six feet apart and wearing our masks) all of a sudden God pops into our thoughts. We may forget them later, but we can't help but notice when it happens. At times, when we gather with those we love, we have a wonderful time; God comes near. At those times even obnoxious uncle Horatio can seem like a really nice guy. Those times may be rare, if your family's like mine; they do happen and they are truly a gift from God.

So if seeking God and God seeking us, why does Paul, who just last week told us that nothing can separate us from God's love, wish to be cut off from Christ? Context is an important word; context can establish a point of view. Paul, although a believer in Jesus and a missionary preacher of the Good News, is, at the same time, a faithful and practicing Jew. Today we may note that, since Judaism and Christianity are two separate religions, this would be practicing syncretism. Most believers in Jesus were, in Paul's day, Jewish. Jesus, himself, was Jewish. God first revealed God to the Israelites. Salvation has come to us through Judaism. The promise of the Messiah was first made to Israel. In Paul's heart of hearts he faced pain that the mission of the gospel did not take root as he hoped. His mission was no longer to Jews but Gentiles.

I hear, or read as the case may be, a rhetorical ploy on Paul's part. He made an outrageous statement that got our attention. What he said made no sense. I had lessons in rhetoric back in the early seventies while at university. I don't remember what it's called any more. If anyone has heard me preach, I've used the same rhetorical ploy. It works. Paul shows the depths of his regrets. Perhaps he has not remembered when he said that all is the grace and gift of God. All of us have beloved members of our family who either don't go to church or don't believe (as we do). As a way of expressing disappointment, sorrow and self doubt I understand his meaning. I would also entrust God to give the gift of faith to them, in God's own good time. Even when we express frustration to God we pray. That's what I read into Paul's words. Nothing has separated him from God.

Another way to read this passage can be that Paul would be willing to give up his life for his kinsmen. Any parent would do that for their children. Our Christian faith is based upon Jesus' dying on the cross for our sake. Jesus is God. God died for us! Paul's says he would be willing to sacrifice his eternal life for his people. That would be unnecessary for only the sacrifice of Jesus

was able to do that. Jesus offered God to God as the only acceptable and viable Sacrifice for our sins. Paul showed, dramatically, the extent of his primal desire to share the gospel

Why did Jesus cross the lake? The answer is the same as the chicken's, to get to the other side. Why did he, really? Context reveals the true answer. Unfortunately, the gospel story each Sunday has no recap like two-part television programs. It's left to the preacher to recap. Last week Jesus heard that John the Baptist, his kinsman, died. Jesus went to a deserted place to mourn, pray and be alone for a while. When he arrived he discovered a crowd of more than five thousand people preceded him. While there, they all shared a bountiful meal out of five loaves of bread and two fish that Jesus shared with them.

As this week's story began, Jesus dismissed the crowds to go home. Jesus sent the twelve lads home in their boat. Finally, in the evening, Jesus was alone to mourn and pray for his cousin John. Jesus was alone in prayer from evening to 3AM or later. The gospel tells us He left the now deserted place during the fourth watch. That's between 3-6AM. I can imagine Jesus regretting having sent the disciples home with the only means of transportation with them.

The scene then switched to the boat. The wind and waves are up and have hindered the twelve's journey. They are only a few miles from shore. One can envision twelve men with oars straining against wind and wave. Most of the fishing boats had a sail. The sail would have been movable with mast, boom and line. I've been sailing. When sailing into the wind, one tacks. The course would be zigzag. The waves would be another thing. The boat could be swamped. They did have twelve men aboard to bail.

Being God, by my estimation, should have a few perks. Since Jesus was basically stranded on the far shore of the lake, I suppose that walking on water could easily be one of them. When we read that we focus on its miraculous manifestation. That is natural; it is. To witness twelve frightened men in the story is natural too. They were being tossed about in an open boat in the darkest night. How, in darkness, did they see Jesus as he moved toward them? With all the pious art we have, it's easy to assume that Jesus glowed in the dark. Perhaps his halo acted as a search light. If Jesus could walk on water, maybe assuming he generated his own light was another perk of being God.

I always pay attention to the story as it's written. This is a dark and stormy night during the last watch at the darkest time. Jesus did not glow. He had no halo. The scripture is clear that Jesus is like us in all but sin. He looked like us. To see Jesus one would never suspect his divine nature. The twelve, as sailors, fishermen and businessmen knew the laws of physics and that no one can walk on water, assume that the dark figure they seem to see in the darkness is a ghost. Jesus message is comforting to them, but as Jesus beckons Peter to come to him in the waves, I have to pause. What kind of fool would get out of the boat? Peter heard a disembodied voice invite him to step out onto stormy waves. Who in their right mind would do that? This gives an entirely new spin on the, "Peter Principal." It's not just incompetency that can reach its own level. Peter needed some one to save him before he got out of the boat, from himself.

That's the point. The wind, waves and walking on water are red herrings. To focus on Jesus power to change the laws of physics and on the shame and lack of faith miss the point. Peter's profound cry, "Lord, save me!" is prayer, literally, over the depths. They came from Peter's fear

of drowning in the deep water in the dark night. Peter stepped out of the boat in his movement to Jesus; a movement of faith and mission. This story foreshadows the life Peter would live as Jesus' missionary until death. Peter needed Jesus' salvation, as do we all.

Each time we turn to God in our fear, loneliness, helplessness and sin we pray the same powerful prayer of Peter, "Lord, save me!" We may feel that to pray those words and ask another for help or direction to be as sign of weakness. Who is the stronger, the one who denies weakness or the one who can admit it? I think the latter. When we admit our weakness we can rely upon the strength of others. We can rely on the strength of Jesus, as did Peter. The twelve in the boat may have felt they were alone, but were they? They discovered Jesus was near. They were still together too. They may have felt tossed and battered by wind and wave, but who calmed them? As they turned to Jesus their storms abated.

What do we face in our own lives? What is our stormy sea? What is our strong head wind? How to we toss about? When we hear our story reflected in the gospel we can know that Jesus is near to us too. We are in this together and not alone. Our prayer can be, like Peter, "Lord, save me!" as we offer ourselves before God, warts and all.

I hope you are healthy in mind, body and soul. I pray that we all may help keep each other safe. Wear a mask in public, wash your hands often and keep social distance from others.

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